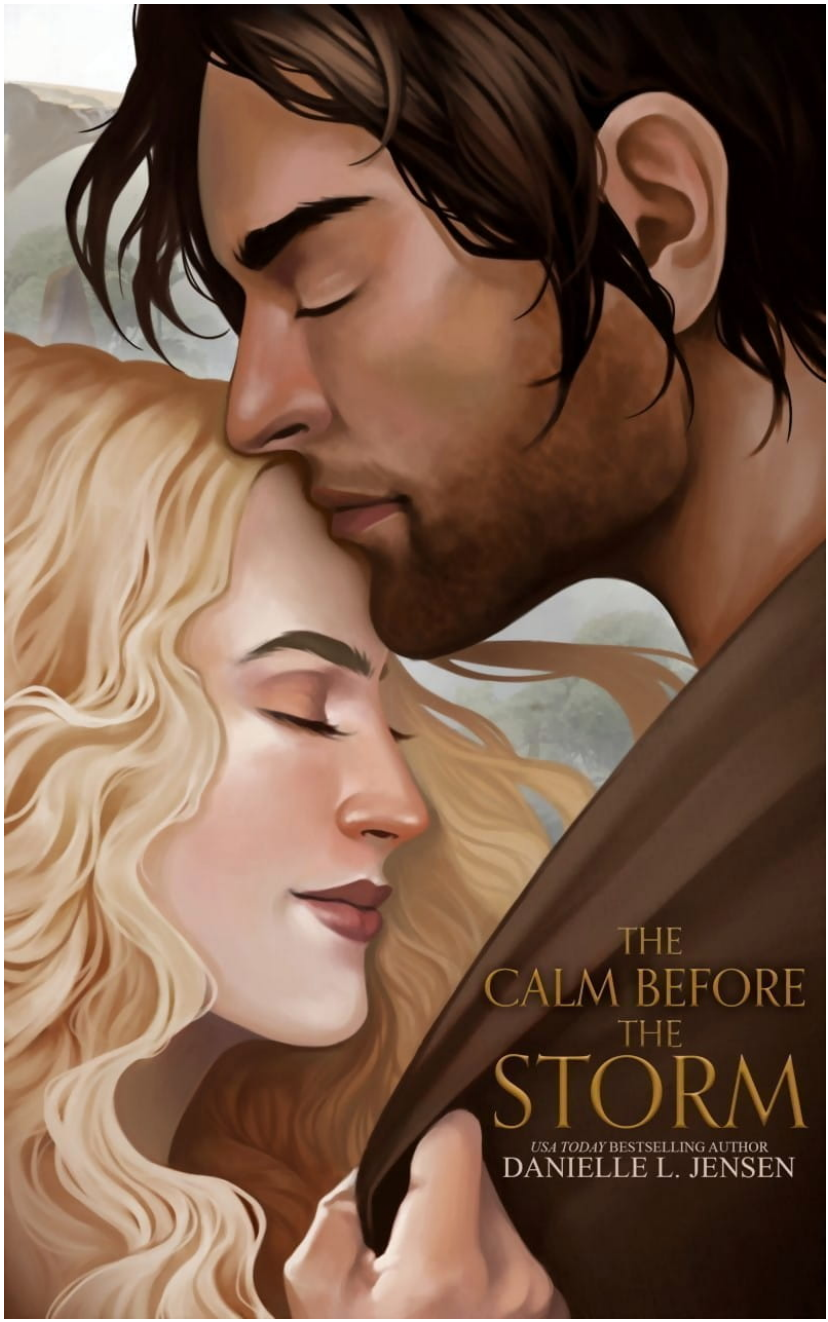
THE
CALM BEFORE
THE
STORM
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DANIELLE L. JENSEN

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

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For my thirsty readers

CONTENT WARNING

This series of bonus chapters contains sexual content that is more explicit than found in *The Bridge Kingdom* or *The Traitor Queen*, but on par with the content in *The Inadequate Heir*. Read only if you are comfortable with explicit content.

1

AREN

AREN KERTELL, the thirty-seventh ruler of Ithicana, jerked awake with a start. His rooms in Eranahl were shadowed, the glow from a jar of algae on the table next to the bed the only source of light. His heart thundered in his chest, his breath rapid and ragged, sweat from the already fading dream dampening his brow.

Just a dream, he told himself. *She's alive.*

Yet his heart refused to steady, his skin crawling with unease that had his hand reaching for the dagger beneath the pillow. Outside, thunder boomed and wind lashed against the balcony doors, the scent of lightning and rain thick on the air. Aren's eyes flicked over the shadows of the room, searching for movement. For threats.

It wouldn't be the first time someone had come for his queen.

One dead by his hand. Another by Aster's. Another languishing in the prison below the palace until the storms cleared enough for a proper Ithicanian execution.

I will gut you, he silently said to whoever might be lurking in the shadows. *I will cut your fucking throat.*

Because that was all anyone who came in the night deserved. That was all *anyone* who came for Lara deserved.

Nothing stirred.

Jor's familiar cough echoed through the walls, and Aren's eyes jerked to the faint outline of light around the door. If Jor was there, no one had come through that way, and Aren had personally checked the heavy latches on the windows before going to bed. There was no one in here. It was just a dream.

She's alive. She's alive. She's alive.

Yet his pulse continued to roar, a bead of sweat rolling down his brow as he slowly shifted his weight to look next to him on the bed.

Lara was sprawled half on her side, half on her back, the strap of her nightgown pulled down, the strip of dark silk a slash across her skin. Even in the dim light, there was no mistaking how thin she was, the infection that had taken hold of the wound in her leg having stolen away flesh and muscle. Having nearly stolen her life.

She was so still.

Aren's chest tightened, terror filling his guts. *Nana said she was over the worst of it,* he reminded himself. *Said that she'd recover completely in time.*

But God help him, he couldn't shake the memories of her lost in fevered dreams, her skin burning hot and her breathing unsteady. How he'd held her hand, all of his grandmother's potions and tonics failing, helpless to do anything as Lara had slipped closer and closer to the edge between life and death.

She's alive.

The words in his head sounded more like a plea than a statement of fact, and Aren's eyes fixed on her chest, searching for the steady rise and fall, but he couldn't make it out in the darkness.

That, or she wasn't breathing at all.

A tremor ran through him as he leaned closer to her face, waiting for the warmth of her breath to brush his cheek.

Waiting.

Waiting.

But no breath came.

Panic surged through his veins, then a woosh of breath hit him in the face, carrying a giggle with it.

Smirking up at him in the darkness, Lara said, "I'm a touch offended that you believe I'd meet my end in such an inglorious fashion as dying in my sleep."

His heart was hammering so hard Aren thought he was going to

be sick. “You were holding your breath!”

Lara chuckled, pushing strands of hair that had come loose of her braid off her face. “Maybe.”

“It’s not funny.”

“It *was* funny,” she answered. “You’ve just forgotten how to laugh.”

Twisting away from her, Aren slung his legs over the edge of the bed and rested his elbows on his knees. *It was just a joke. She’s fine.*

The bed shifted as she crawled across it, her arms wrapping around him and her face resting against his shoulder. “Are you angry?”

He shook his head, words feeling beyond him, his heart still racing.

Lara was silent for a long moment, then said, “I… I’m just tired of being treated like an invalid.”

He could understand that. Knew that it was against her nature to lie in bed, idle for days at a time, but… “I’ve seen you without breath in your lungs, your heart still. I don’t ever want to see that again.”

Lara exhaled a long breath. “There are moments I forget that. Or it feels like it happened to someone else. A story. Not my reality. Or yours.” She buried her face in his neck, her grip tightening around him. “I’m sorry.”

The last thing he wanted was for her to feel guilty about more things than she already did. Reaching around, Aren caught her by the waist, ever mindful of her healing injuries as he pulled her into his lap. “Not everyone can be funny, Lara,” he told her gravely. “But it’s all right—I love you *despite* your comedic failings. No one is perfect.”

Except to him, she was perfect. She was everything.

He sensed her considering a retort, but instead of flaying him with her wit, his wife only twisted a lock of his hair around her index finger and said, “Clearly my humor needs some exercise. I’m

getting up and leaving this room today, else I'll lose my wit entirely."

Though he'd known this moment was coming, Aren still stiffened. "This joke isn't any funnier than the last. You need to get your strength back."

"Agreed. Which is why I need to start moving around."

She wasn't wrong. But in this room, he could keep her safe. Not just from those who sought her death, but from the dark looks. Whispered words. The hate. "Not yet."

"Just how do you think you're going to stop me?"

She rose to her feet, and though nothing showed on her face but defiance, Aren didn't miss the way her leg quivered beneath her weight. He gave it a pointed look, then rose himself, lifting her in his arms as he did. Ignoring her protests, he put her back on the bed, pinning her wrists to the pillow and wishing he wasn't quite so keenly aware of her body beneath his.

And that his own body wasn't so quick to react.

"Well," Lara purred, the corners of her mouth turning upward. "If this is how you plan to keep me here, then here I will remain."

"Lara…" He dropped his face to her throat, still gripping her wrists though he was careful to keep his weight on his elbows. "We can't. Nana said—"

"Are you really going to allow your *grandmother* to dictate what you can and cannot do with your own wife?"

The intelligent answer was *yes*, but the blood fueling his brain was rapidly abandoning it for other parts of his body. Especially as she wrapped a leg around his hips, her nightgown riding up to her waist. Leaving nothing between them. "You're still injured."

"I think you'll find the parts of me required for this particular activity are in the peak of health."

"I don't think that's how it works."

"Well, I disagree."

She rubbed her sex against his cock, and God help him, she was already wet. Clearly wanted this as much as he did, but he was

supposed to be the voice of reason. Except reason was abandoning him along with intelligence as his wife arched her back, nightgown pulling down to expose her breasts. “You’re not supposed to exert yourself.”

“Then you do the hard work.” She dug her heel into his back, grinding against him and erasing all thought from his head.

“I’m tired of waiting,” she said. “I need you in me.”

His control shattered like glass, and he claimed her mouth, parting her lips with his tongue so that he could taste her, resisting the urge to plunge into her body and make her his again. He knew every inch of her body, had touched it and tasted it nightly until her cursed father had invaded and everything had gone to shit, and Aren wanted her back. Wanted to kiss each curve and line of her beautiful body, to claim her with his mouth before he buried his cock in her. Wanted to hear his queen scream his name as she climaxed.

Releasing her wrists, he trailed his fingers down her arms, the whimper that exited her lips sending a jolt of desire through him. He kissed the rapid pulse in her throat, the delicate line of her collarbone, then dropped his lips to her breast, drawing her nipple into his mouth. Lara gasped, her back arching beneath him. “Don’t stop.”

Aren wasn’t sure he was capable of stopping. From the moment he’d set eyes on her, he’d wanted her, but it was because he loved her that he couldn’t deny her. Catching her other nipple between his teeth, he nipped at it, smiling as she buried her fingers in his hair. His own fingers trailed down her side, down the hard muscle of her leg, then up the inside of her thigh. She quivered beneath him, her nails digging into his scalp, her breathing rapid as she pulled his lips back to hers. “Please,” she whispered as she kissed him. “I need you.”

There was a tightness to her voice, an edge that made Aren pause because he’d heard that tone from her before. After he’d stitched her up following the battle for Gamire Island, then

proceeded to fuck her with no regard for the fact she'd lost a quarter of her blood to the wound on her leg.

Then he'd left her.

All her life, Lara had been taught that her value was in what she could accomplish only to have those who should've cared about her, should've protected her, turn on her once she'd served her purpose. Who could blame her for allowing that to sink into her soul, especially after how he'd treated her? Who could blame her for continuing to risk her health—her *life*—just to ensure she was worth something to those she loved?

"Aren?"

There was a hint of trepidation in her voice, and he silently cursed himself because its presence was his fault. Resting his weight on one elbow, he smoothed her hair back from her face and then kissed her. Meeting her gaze, he said, "I love you, Lara. Nothing in this world short of death will ever take me from your side, and even then, it would only be until I could find you in whatever comes after. I will never leave you." He hesitated, then added, "And I know that I said all these words before only to cast you aside. Not once, but twice."

Lara turned her face away from his, eyes squeezing shut. "You know I don't blame you for that, Aren. What I did was unforgivable. I lied to you."

"I said nothing would take me from your side but then allowed something to do so," he answered. "But I didn't stop loving you. Not once, Lara. Not once. And I never will."

She opened her eyes to meet his again, "There are moments when hearing that from you feels like a dream I might wake from."

That broke his heart. "It's the truth. You are brilliant and brave. Empathetic and kind to those who deserve it." He kissed her again, tasting the salt of a tear that had trickled down her cheek. "There is no one else I'd rather have at my back during a storm or in my arms when the clouds clear. There is nothing and no one in this life or the next that I want more than you, Lara."

“Then why are you holding back?”

“Because I don’t want you to hurt yourself,” he said. “I don’t want to risk you.”

“I’m fine, Aren.”

“You always say that. You think that showing any weakness makes you worthless.” Lara went still beneath him, her face abruptly unreadable, but he pressed onward anyway. “I know your worth. I see it every time I look at you, know it every time I hear your voice. You have nothing to prove, but I do. I need to prove to you that I will always be at your side, no matter what we face.”

“I already know that.”

“Do you?”

Her lip quivered. “Yes.”

Whether she was lying to him or lying to herself, Aren wasn’t certain. “No more deception between us, Lara. No more lies or half-truths. No secrets. I swear to it.”

She hesitated, then nodded. “I swear to it. No more secrets.”

Shifting his weight, Aren kissed her. “And when the healers say that you are well enough for exertion”—he pressed against her—“I promise it will have been worth the wait.”

Lara rolled her eyes and smiled, and he kissed her again, linking her fingers with his. Tasted his beautiful wife. Relished her. Prayed to fate and the stars for a moment to breathe before they were tested again.

Fate, of course, had different plans, and a knock sounded at the door.

2

LARA

LARA TWITCHED, the sharp rap on the door startling her, and she instinctively slipped her hand under her pillow to where her knife was concealed. Never mind that she didn't have the strength yet to fully brush her own hair much less wield a blade.

She hated feeling weak. Hated how her heart fluttered and her legs trembled every time she stood, a visit to the water closet feeling like she'd climbed a mountain rather than cross the room. *You did this to yourself,* Nana was fond of telling her, and it was hard to argue the old woman's point. In the days after she'd awoken from her first bout of illness after the battle for Eranahl, Lara had pushed herself to the limit, needing to prove herself worthy of the crown that had been placed back on her head. Needing to involve herself as much as she could in rebuilding the kingdom that had suffered so much as the result of her actions. One stupid misstep on the stairs had broken open the wound on her leg, and it had festered, nearly killing her.

And leaving her confined to this room ever since. Not just weak but…useless.

Another knock sounded, and Aren reached up to draw her hand down from the blade. "They can wait," he murmured, kissing her throat. "I'm not ready to get out of bed."

"It could be something important."

"Not as important as who is in my bed."

Aren kissed her again, tongue parting her lips as his thumbs stroked the backs of her hands. Lara's blood warmed, an aching need for him building between her legs. He was still hard, rubbing

against the apex of her thighs. Though she knew he was trying to protect her, might well be right to do so, Lara still lifted her hips, his thick tip pressing inside of her.

Aren groaned, his large body shuddering as he said, “God, woman. Did you not hear a damned thing I just said? Or have you just chosen to disregard all of it?”

Instead of answering, Lara hooked her leg around him and pulled, her back arching with pleasure as he filled her. Her heart was fluttering wildly but she didn’t care. She loved him more than life. Wanted him more than breath. And with everything feeling so fragile, so tenuous, Lara needed this connection to him. Knew that for all his protests, Aren needed it, too.

“Lara…” he breathed, the sound half protest and half desire. A third knock sounded, louder and more insistent, and he turned his head and shouted, “Piss off!”

Silence.

The door exploded inward, revealing a scowling Nana framed by the lamplight. She leveled a finger at them and snarled, “I knew it!”

“Get out!” Aren roared.

“Get off of her!” Nana roared back, storming into the room. “I didn’t nurse this woman back to health only for you to break her because you couldn’t keep your idiot cock in your trousers!”

“I’m not doing anything to her!”

A blatant lie, given he was still very much inside of her, but Lara said nothing. It was about time Aren stood up to his grandmother on something, even if in this, he had little ground to stand on.

“Oh? Then you won’t mind if I take this?” Nana reached for the blanket and Aren cursed, snatching at the bedding, the two engaging in a vicious tug-of-war while Jor and the other guards gaped in the doorway.

Her own temper simmering to a boil, Lara jerked her nightgown back into place and then shouted, “Enough! I started it,

so if you wish to cast insults, Amelie, cast them at me!"

The old woman scowled but dropped the blanket. "Idiot girl. I expect him to be blinded by lust, but you should know better."

"You don't speak to her that way." Aren dragged the blanket up to his waist, his face flushed with anger. "She's the Queen of Ithicana and you *will* treat her with respect."

Nana spat on the floor. "And you're the king. Yet instead of dealing with your kingdom's problems, you leave your sister to do the work while you play nursemaid. You do Lara no favors by ignoring your duties to Ithicana in favor of your *husbandly* needs."

"I am not ignoring my duties."

"Oh?" Nana reached down to pick up Aren's discarded clothing. "Then why is there a council meeting going on right now while you stand, naked as a jaybird, arguing with your grandmother about whether you can hump your wife?" She threw the clothing at him. "Get dressed and go rule."

Lara closed her eyes for a heartbeat, silently cursing Ahnna. The Ithicanian princess had grown used to control in Aren's absence, and this was not the first time she'd behaved as though he hadn't returned at all. "You should go."

Silence stretched, then Aren gave a stiff nod and pulled on his trousers. Bending to kiss Lara's cheek, he then said to his grandmother, "We're going to have words about this, Amelie."

"I look forward to it, Your Grace," Nana answered sourly, watching as Aren exited the room. Aster entered as soon as Aren disappeared, carrying a tray of food.

Lara bit down on a sigh of annoyance at the sight of the man. Though he'd once sought her death, since the incident with the sharks during the battle for Eranahl, the ex-watch commander was now her most strident supporter. "Fanatic," Aren always muttered when Aster was out of earshot, and while Lara was inclined to agree, she also knew that the old man had saved her life, and she owed him for that.

"Late to rise today, Your Grace?" he asked.

“Is it late?” She passed a weary hand over her face before glancing at the balcony doors, no light visible around them. “It’s still dark.”

“The storm is heavy over the island.” He set the tray on the bed next to her. “I checked everything for poison myself, Your Grace.”

The same conversation they’d had every day since she’d woken from her fever, yet for some reason, seeing a bite taken from every item on her plate pissed her off this morning. “It’s really not necessary for you to sample my food, Aster. Jor has the cooks watched while everything is prepared.” She bit her tongue to keep from adding, *Besides, you wouldn’t taste the poison in something until you were dead.*

“Four people have already tried to kill you, Your Grace,” he answered. “And there is a small but vocal faction within Eranahl demanding your execution, so I think it is safe to say there are assassins around every corner.”

Nana snorted, but Lara barely heard her, a vision of a woman with a knife filling her mind’s eye. How the woman’s face had been twisted with hatred, Lara too weak to move, too weak to scream. It had been luck that Aster had come into her room, embedding his knife in the assassin’s chest before the woman could strike. She’d fallen on Lara, blood soaking the blankets, the weight of her driving the air from Lara’s lungs until Aster had pulled the corpse off her.

She owed him her life.

Aster was watching her expectantly, so Lara dutifully picked up her fork and took a mouthful of fish, then another, knowing that he’d watch her eat the whole meal. Thankfully it was small, the entire island still on rations. As it would remain until the storm eased and boats could return to the water to fish and retrieve supplies from the other islands, as well as the bridge itself.

“Out,” Nana said to him after Lara had finished eating, and ever unfrazzled by the woman’s tone, Aster took the tray and exited the room to take up his post.

“You need to back off,” Lara snapped the moment the man had left the room. “Aren has endured enough without you berating him at every turn.”

“Why? Because if I don’t, you’ll poison me into the shitter again?”

If you don’t, I’ll cut out your goddamned tongue. The words rose to Lara’s lips, but she bit down on them. “You’re his grandmother. You should be supporting him.”

Nana stared her down. “Drowning clearly stripped you of some of your intelligence, girl. I *am* supporting Aren as a grandmother should—by protecting him from himself.” She gave a sharp shake of her head. “As a king, he already suffers from people telling him what he wants to hear rather than what will help him, but I refuse to do that. He’s behaving like a husband, not a ruler. If that’s how he wants to live, he needs to abdicate to Ahnna and leave.”

Lara’s jaw tightened, and she looked away. Such was the life of a monarch, she knew that, but couldn’t Aren have a goddamned moment of respite? Hadn’t he earned it?

As though hearing her thoughts, Nana said, “This isn’t the moment to breathe, the moment to rest, Lara. This is the moment to leverage what you and Aren accomplished. To leverage the support of fanatics like Aster who see the behavior of overgrown fish as a reason to follow you, even though we know that the creatures steered clear of you because your blood was fouled with stimulants.”

That had been the reason?

Lara’s stomach dropped, the world spinning around her, for not once had it occurred to her that there’d been something in her blood that had driven the sharks away.

“Too that end, perhaps it is time your convalescence ends,” Nana said. “Let’s have a look at you.”

Lara dutifully moved to sit on the edge of the bed, though her mind drifted as Nana pressed an ear to her chest, listening to her heart. *Had* it been the stimulants in her blood that kept the sharks

from attacking her? She'd ingested as much of the herb as she could to push through the blood loss and pain of the injury to her leg, so it was possible her blood had tasted…*off-putting* to the creatures. And there had been plenty of other people to choose from in the water. She bit the insides of her cheeks, her hands cold.

Why do you even care, she snapped at herself. *It's not as though you put any stock in superstitions and myths.*

Except…she'd drawn some strength from that moment. From having the defenders of Ithicana allow her to pass to the gates, giving her a chance to live. From their belief in her.

Idiot. Lara squeezed her eyes shut.

"Heart and lungs are good," Nana said, then ran a prodding finger over the red line across Lara's ribs. Where her father had sliced her open with his sword before she'd stabbed him. Before she'd killed him. "This is healing very well."

Lara gave a tight nod, knowing that none of those things were the demon that haunted her.

Groaning, Nana lowered herself to the floor, knees cracking, and then began unravelling the bandage wrapped around Lara's thigh.

It was hard not to hold her breath, because her memory still drew up visions of the wound when it had turned foul. Red and rotten and seeping things she wished never to witness again. Though she knew the wound was now clear of infection, it was still a relief when the bandage pulled away to reveal the forming scar, the redness to either side faded to pink.

Nana held a lamp up to the injury, sniffed at it, then set to poking and prodding. "Any longer idle and you'll limp for the rest of your life," she finally said. "Time to get off your back and on your feet, though you'll need to take it slowly at first."

Lara lifted one eyebrow. "Seems your invasion of my bedroom was unnecessary."

A snort was the only response she got, the old woman never one to apologize for anything. Nana rose to her feet, gathering her

supplies back into her bag. Then she met Lara's gaze. "There're no herbs for contraceptive tonics. Eranahl is stripped to the bones of everything, as there are women here besides you who wish to avoid pregnancy. I've requested that obtaining more be a priority, but until the storms subside enough to retrieve supplies…" She shrugged. "Though I suppose there is a chance that you don't need them."

Lara hesitated, for this was not something she'd put much thought to.

"That's what I thought."

Goddamn it, the woman was a queen of manipulation. Not that Lara didn't believe the information was true, but— "Thank you for keeping me apprised."

Without another word, Aren's grandmother took her things and left the room, Lia stepping inside as she left. Because God forbid Lara have a moment alone. "I'm going to clean up," she informed the bodyguard, "and then…"

She had no idea what she'd do.

Lia only said, "As you wish, Your Grace. We'll escort you wherever you wish to go."

The formality ground on Lara's nerves, for once upon a time, she'd drunk and laughed with this woman. Yet Lia, like Aster, had taken her swim through shark-infested waters as a sign and now treated Lara with nothing short of reverence.

Eyes on the bath, Lara slowly made her way across the room, her leg protesting each step. Her heart was pounding by the time she made it to the edge of the pool, but feeling Lia's eyes on her, Lara didn't pause before climbing into the bath. Her breath came in rapid pants, which Lara did her best to hide from the other woman by sinking low in the water, where she finally felt alone.

Her eyes burned, half from pain and half from anger at her weakness. And then all for her own stupidity because she'd forgotten her knife under her pillow on the bed, and she couldn't summon the energy to go retrieve it.

Fuck. Lara balled her hands into fists, bubbling fury rising in her chest, the emotion making her question everything. As always, one question shouted the loudest.

Is staying a mistake?

She'd planned to leave when she'd woken in the days after the battle. Had only remained because against every odd, Aren had wanted her to stay. In the time before she'd relapsed, Lara had felt hope that there was a future for her in Ithicana. That despite everything, this was the place she was meant to be.

Those hopes now felt like delusions.

Biting the insides of her cheeks, she forced herself to reach for the soap. Scrubbed her hair and body, exhaustion biting at her as she eased her too-thin body out of the bath and toweled dry. Her long hair, she wove into a simple braid, which she pinned around her head like a coronet, arms trembling by the time she was finished. Donning lace undergarments, she took a plain green dress from the wardrobe and pulled it over her head, the silk whispering in the silence. A belt to hold her knife, a pair of sandals, and Aren's mother's necklace completed her attire, but instead of leaving the room, Lara sat on a chair, just breathing as she stared at the door.

Get up, she ordered herself. *You need to get out of this room.*

But fear throbbed in her chest at what she'd face beyond the confines of this space. Those who wished to kill her. Those who hated her. Those who worshipped her only because they didn't know the truth.

Get up.

Lara rose, meeting Lia's watchful gaze. "Take me to the council room."

The other woman nodded. "Yes, Your Grace." Then she opened the door and leaned out, murmuring, "Aster, the queen wishes to attend the council meeting."

Lara gritted her teeth, waiting for the man to argue, but he only gave an approving nod and held out an arm. "I'm quite fine," she said, moving past him, taking in the six other armed Ithicanians

standing in the corridor. All of them possessed the alertness of warriors expecting attack from every angle, and it made her wonder if there had been more attempts to reach her than she knew about. Than even Aren knew about.

Aster coughed. “They aren’t in the war room, I’m afraid. The meeting took place over breakfast and is in the dining room.”

Which was on the main level of the palace. Gritting her teeth, Lara gave him a smile. “Good. I’m still hungry.”

Half of her guard moved ahead down the corridor, the rest remaining behind while Aster and Lia strode at her side. Or rather, shuffled, for each step she took was slow and unsteady. The silk of her dress was glued to her back by the time she reached the grand staircase, her body quivering from the effort.

“Your Grace,” Lia murmured, “perhaps you might allow us—”

“No,” Lara interrupted from between her teeth. “I’m just stiff.”

“The queen was chosen by Ithicana’s guardians,” Aster declared loudly. “Thrice, death has tried to claim her, and thrice was he denied. He will not test her mettle again.”

The guardians didn’t choose you, a dark voice whispered inside her head. *They recoiled from you.* Lara shoved the voice away, taking a tight grip on the banister, her knuckles white. *You were the little cockroach long before any of this. What are stairs compared to what you’ve endured?*

She took one step down, then another, painfully aware that the servants were stopping their tasks to watch. That a crowd of watchers were gathering at the base of the stairs. *Do not falter,* she silently chanted. *Do not show weakness.*

Her legs quivered as she reached the landing on the second floor, nearly buckling. But she pressed downward.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Her guards motioned for the crowd to back away from the stairs as she reached the bottom. Though her focus was entirely on

keeping her grip on the banister, Lara didn't miss the flash of motion from the corner of her eye. Instinct took over, and she let go of the banister and drew her blade, whirling to face her attacker even as her guards drew their weapons. Arm back, she readied to throw, but Aster caught her wrist. "Steady, Majesty."

Lara froze, eyes focusing on the wide-eyed face of a servant woman. Then on what the woman held. Not a weapon, but a cane.

"Apologies, Your Grace," the woman whispered. "Broke my ankle last season and this served me well. I thought you might have use of it while you heal."

Bile rose in Lara's throat. *I nearly killed her.*

Would have killed her, if not for Aster's quick reflexes. "Thank you." The words came out as a croak, and she coughed to clear her throat. "I'm sorry, I…" *I'm afraid.* "Thank you for your kindness."

The woman handed the cane to Aster, and he examined it swiftly before giving it to Lara. She gripped the carved handle, the wood polished smooth. Using it felt like admitting how weak she truly was. Except who was she fooling? In the mirror on the wall, Lara could see what the Ithicanians saw. A too-thin form, face drained of color, and whisps of hair glued to her cheeks with sweat. Even standing still, her legs trembled, and next to her, Lia's arms were slightly outstretched as though she anticipated her queen collapsing at any second.

No one, was the answer. She was fooling no one.

Leaning her weight on the cane, Lara smiled at the woman. "This will help a great deal. I'll return it to you when I am well again. What is your name?"

"It's Emma, Your Grace."

"Thank you, Emma." Giving the woman another smile, Lara then clenched her teeth and started down the hallway to the dining room.

Click shuffle.

Click shuffle.

Click shuffle.

Already she hated the sound, but there was no denying that the cane took the burden off her injured leg. The corridor seemed to stretch on forever, the guards standing outside the dining room doors watching her progress with undisguised interest. Lara's heart pounded harder as she neared them, irrationally certain that they'd deny her entry. That they'd not only tell her she was unwelcome inside that room, but also prohibited.

What their intentions were, she didn't get to discover, for Aster ignored both and rapped his knuckles on the door. He paused for barely a heartbeat before opening it and declaring loudly, "Her Majesty, Queen Lara of Ithicana."

Lara cringed, for she was certain that Aren had entered the room with no announcement at all. Ithicana was not a nation consumed by formalities. But there was no helping it, so she squared her shoulders and went inside.

Aren was already on his feet. At the sight of her, he moved to come around the dining table, but she gave the slightest shake of her head. His jaw tightened, but he remained at his place, his voice cool as he said, "Get off your asses and show some respect."

Eyebrows rose on the faces of the watch commanders, but all climbed to their feet. Lara did not fail to notice that Ahnna was the last to comply, the princess's face unreadable as she watched Lara circle the table and take the seat Aren pulled out for her. It was a struggle not to sigh with relief at being seated, but instead Lara kept her shoulders square as she announced, "Amelie has announced that I am well enough for my convalescence to end."

"Most welcome news, Your Grace," Mara, the commander of Northwatch, said, taking her seat once Aren was settled. This was the first time Lara had seen the woman who'd once been so vehemently against her presence in Ithicana, and she wondered if that was still the case. The thought vanished from her mind as Mara added, "We were just discussing Maridrina, and your brother."

It was impossible not to stiffen. Lara took a long mouthful of

water from the glass Aren had just finished pouring for her, then said, “Which one? I have many.”

Ahnna picked up a decanter of whiskey and filled a glass, pushing it in front of Lara. “Keris.”

There was a challenge in the princess’s voice, as though Ahnna were placing the blame for Keris’s actions at Lara’s feet for no reason more than that they shared the same blood. “Ah. Has he taken the throne? Or has someone put a knife in his back?” After what he’d done, Lara hoped it was the latter.

Aren cleared his throat, resting an elbow on the table and meeting Lara’s gaze. “We don’t know. The last information we received was that he was in control in Vencia, was negotiating the return of our Maridrinian prisoners via Southwatch, but the storms have prevented our spies from sending any reports. Once this storm clears, we’ll know more.”

“We should be prepared to act immediately,” Ahnna said before Lara could answer. “Which means learning what we can about our enemy.”

“He’s not our enemy,” Aren said right as Lara snapped, “I don’t know anything about him.”

Silence stretched, the commanders all watching them with interest.

“I left Vencia when I was five,” Lara said. “Since that time, I’ve seen him twice. When we were extracting Aren from the Vencia palace and during the skirmish on the beach north of Nerastis, neither of which were opportune moments to *reconnect.* I don’t know him. He means nothing to me.”

“You certainly look alike,” Ahnna said, pulling loose a pencil sketch from a pile of papers, then pushing it down the table toward Lara.

“Just as you and I look alike,” Aren retorted. “It is nothing more than having the same parents. If you have questions about Keris, pose them to me. I’m the one who knows him.”

“Do you?” Ahnna asked. “Because it seems that the information

previously provided by our spies about Maridrina's heir are woefully incorrect. They claim he's a scholar and a pacifist, possessed of no military acumen but a strong proclivity for expensive wine and women."

Ahnna continued to read from a report in front of her, but Lara barely heard the description of her brother, her eyes fixed on the portrait. The spy who'd drawn it had some talent, having captured Keris almost perfectly. He was frowning, strands of shoulder-length hair spilling about his face, and his full lips slightly parted as though he'd been about to speak. No color had been added, but the longer Lara stared at the drawing, the more her memory filled in the gaps until what she stared at was a reflection of reality. Dark blond hair and fair skin, eyes the deepest of azures and twin to her own.

Ahnna's voice faded away, replaced by an echo of a memory. Of sitting in the sunshine picking petals from a flower, while a boy sitting cross-legged next to her read aloud from a book. "You really ought to learn, Lara," he said, looking up from the pages. "Then you can read these stories yourself."

"I like when you read them to me, Keris."

Lara blinked away the memory, hearing Aren say, "I'm not sure anyone truly knows him, to be honest. The spies have only seen what Keris wishes for them to know, and it has only been recent events that have caused him to reveal other layers."

The conversation faded away again, replaced with the blurred outlines of her father's offices in his tower.

"He's coming, Lara! Hide!" the boy hissed, pushing her into a closet. "Don't let him hear you."

She peered through the slats of the door, heart racing as a man's form appeared, hands turning clammy as her father's voice demanded, "What are you doing in here, Keris?" A pause. "Did you do this? Did you make this mess?"

"Yes, Father. I was looking for ink and accidentally spilled it."

"Useless boy!"

The thud of a heavy blow landing, a cry of pain.

"You'll be whipped for this."

She waited until they were gone, then exited the closet, bending to retrieve scattered pieces of paper, all covered with the drawings she'd made.

"Obviously this information is wrong." Ahnna's voice intruded on her thoughts. "It says he knows nothing of military strategy, yet *you* say it was his plan that brought the battle to Eranahl's gates. A battle we would have lost if not for that storm."

This was a conversation she needed to be part of, but Lara couldn't tear her eyes from the portrait, memory drawing her down and down into one she remembered well.

Hands closed on her shoulders, the stink of sweat and metal filling her nose. "Mother," she shrieked as the soldier picked her up. "Mother, help me!"

A faded vision of her mother filled her eyes, a woman struggling against guards who held both her wrists even as she screamed, "Let my daughter go! I will not let you take her from me!"

The guard turned, grunting in pain as Lara's heels struck his leg. "Be still, Princess. It is your father's wish that you go with your sisters."

Her mother was screaming, loud and shrill, and this was *always* when Lara woke from this nightmare, always the last thing she heard.

But this time, she couldn't escape the horror.

"Let my sister go!" The boy was there, hammering his fists against the soldier. "Let her go!"

Her father's face came into her line of sight. "This is none of your concern, boy," he snarled, hand striking down. "Get yourself back to your mother before I have you whipped."

"Keris!" she screamed. "Keris, help me."

"Lara?"

She jumped, realizing Aren had said her name. Perhaps more

than once. “I’m sorry. What I remember of him are childhood recollections, none of which are relevant.”

“But you agree that his focus is on Valcotta, not Ithicana, yes?”

Bloody hell, how much of the conversation had she missed? “Undoubtedly. We know the Empress has her sights set on Maridrina, and with half his fleet sunk in the Tempest Seas, his army cut by third, and the kingdom still plagued by famine, he has to know that he’s an easy target.” All of which everyone at this table knew, which meant she’d added nothing. “Given his relationship with Zarrah, I think he’ll be focused on avoiding war with Valcotta at all costs.”

Next to her, Aren shifted in his seat even as the watch commanders leaned forward. *Shit.*

Ahnna took a mouthful of wine. “The heir to Maridrina and the heir to Valcotta have a…relationship? One you know of but failed to mention?”

Lara bit the insides of her cheeks, saying nothing because Aren clearly had reasons for withholding this information. He exhaled slowly, then said, “When it comes to each other, both are tight-lipped, but I think it safe to say they were lovers.”

Ahnna’s eyebrows rose, but it was Mara who whistled between her teeth, then said, “There’s a story here, and I, for one, would like to hear it.”

Words Lara had once said herself.

Resting his elbows on the table, Aren poured himself a drink, then proceeded to tell the council what he knew of Keris and Zarrah. Lara found herself entranced, for while some of it she knew, there were seemingly endless little details Aren had observed while in the company of the two that he’d never mentioned. He finished by saying, “He’ll do anything for Zarrah. Anything.”

As he once had for her, all those long years ago. Yet time, as always, changed everything.

Lara’s hands balled into fists. “His sentiments will fade and then

he'll stab her in the back when it serves his interests. It's what he does."

3

AREN

THE VEHEMENCE in Lara's voice startled him, and he wasn't the only one. Every watch commander looked to his wife, who snatched up her wine and took a long mouthful, clearly having no interest in elaborating.

"It's information we can use against Keris, if he takes the throne," Ahnna said, breaking the silence. "Or before, if we wish to prevent it. The Maridrinians won't crown a man in love with a Valcottan; the blood is too bad between those nations. Sow the right seeds in the right places, and he'll have a knife in his back within the week."

"Absolutely not," Aren snapped, though in the past, that was *exactly* the sort of strategy Ithicana would have employed. "And every last one of you will hold this information in confidence. If I discover otherwise, there *will* be consequences."

Lara set her glass down with a loud *clack*. "Why? After what he did, he deserves it."

It was always *he. Him.* She had not once called Keris by his name, and with the way Lara had been staring at her brother's portrait, Aren was beginning to realize that Lara had taken Keris's actions harder than he'd realized.

"I'm protecting *Zarrah*," he answered carefully. "Any rumors we sow in Maridrina will swiftly spread south, and Zarrah will pay the price. I'll not do that to the person who risked her own neck to help Ithicana when no one else would. You were there, Lara. You and Jor know better than anyone else the lengths she was willing to go."

Lara only refilled her glass and then emptied it. Given her health and time away from any form of drink, he had no doubt that the wine was fueling her temper. Which was likely why Ahnna had poured the first glass for her. He silently cursed his sister, who made no secret that she had not, and would not, forgive Lara's actions.

Ahnna said, "She wasn't the only one who chose to ally with us. Harendell—"

Aren interrupted her before she could finish. "King Edward himself made the choice to send a handful of ships. His life was never at risk, and Harendell is a formal ally of Ithicana. Whereas Zarrah went against the Empress's specific orders. Committed treason for the sake of righting a wrong."

"Debatable," Ahnna said. "There was no battle at Southwatch. Zarrah committed no treason."

"But the intent was there." Aren rose to his feet, pacing the length of the dining room. "It isn't as though the Empress won't learn that was the plan. Soldiers aren't going to keep that secret. For all we know, the Empress has already taken action against Zarrah. Possibly even disinherited her."

"In which case, there is no reason not to deploy the information in Maridrina," Ahnna said, her eyes staring pointedly at Lara. "Keris has proven himself an enemy to Ithicana, and we must treat him accordingly."

Aren's temper boiled, instinct demanding that he lash out and put his sister in her place for the slight against his wife, but he forced himself to take a breath. "You think whichever of his brothers takes his place will be any better?" When Ahnna said nothing, he slowly panned the watch commanders, using the opportunity to glance at Lara's face. It was blank and unreadable. "The other princes will wish to avenge their father and will take action against us by trying to regain the bridge. Whereas we *know* that Keris hated Silas, we know he has no interest in avenging him and attempting to take back the bridge, and we know his eyes are

fixed south. Call him an enemy if you wish, but he's the lesser evil and prudence demands that we stay our hand."

"Doing nothing makes Ithicana look weak," Ahnna barked. "We must take action and show that those who strike against us will face consequences."

"Do not presume to tell me what I *must* and *must not do,* Commander." His voice was frigid. "While I will never be fully able to express my gratitude for your leadership of Ithicana while I was absent, I am now returned."

"Then I'll leave it in your hands to call a vote," she answered, voice equally as cool. "Unless, of course, that's no longer how you wish to rule."

Mara coughed, then rose. "If I might interject, would it not be best to wait to decide on a course of action until we've received fresh information from the continent, else risk making decisions based on speculation?"

The other commanders nodded and murmured their agreement.

"Shall we adjourn, then?" Aren wanted to be through with this meeting. Needed to be alone again with his wife, his queen, who had no business being on her feet much less enduring this bullshit. "Or are there other matters requiring my immediate attention?"

Ahnna said nothing, only slid two pieces of paper toward him.

Aren's stomach twisted with nausea as his eyes skipped over the documents, which were the formal orders for the execution of the individuals who'd tried to assassinate Lara, both requiring his signature. He stared fixedly at the names for a long moment, then picked up a pen, dipping it in the ink pot. But as he reached out to sign his name, slender fingers closed over his wrist.

"I grant them mercy," Lara said softly. "As queen, it is my right to do so, and I exercise it now."

"They tried to murder you." *Had nearly succeeded.* "While you were unconscious and half-dead with fever, they tried to take your life. They don't deserve mercy."

Her azure eyes moved from his face to the pages. "Many see me

as Ithicana's enemy, and there is no law here against killing the enemy. They did what they felt was right and just, and they don't deserve to be punished for it."

His anger boiled over. "Bullshit, Lara. They acted knowing that you are my wife, after I'd formally declared to all of Eranahl that you are my queen."

"*Your* queen." Picking up the pieces of paper, Lara ripped them in half. "But that does not make me theirs."

Aren flung the pen on the table, ink splattering everywhere. "That's *exactly* what it means." He scrutinized the watch commanders, men and women he'd known for their entire lives, before fixing his gaze on his twin. "I thought I had made myself clear, but in case I have not, allow me to reiterate. If you wish for me to remain Ithicana's king, then Lara will be my queen. If you demand she leave, then I will go with her." Jerking a knife from his belt, he drew it across his palm, then squeezed his fist, blood dripping onto the map laid across the table's center. "On my blood and honor, where Lara goes, I go. Even if it's to the fucking grave. So let's do this here and now: Vote as to whether you wish us *both* on the throne or not."

For a long moment, no one moved, and his heart sank. For Lara, to *be* with Lara, he'd walk away and never look back. Yet it still gouged at his soul that after everything she'd done, after everything that they'd both done, that his commanders wouldn't stand with him. Maybe he'd been a fool to expect they would, for his people had suffered and lost as a result of his mistakes, and Lara's. Still, he'd hoped…

Next to him, Lara rose to her feet, and Aren knew what she was going to say. That she'd leave, if that was what it would take. Ever and always, she was willing to sacrifice herself. Except this time, he wouldn't let her. Aren opened his mouth to forestall her words, but instead of speaking, Lara took his hand and gripped it tightly, shoulders squared in defiance.

Claiming him and daring anyone to question her right to do so.

To his shock, Mara gave an approving nod. The older woman had once despised Lara, but it seemed that she, like Aster, had changed her tune. Mara climbed to her feet. “I was beginning to fear that you’d lost your balls, girl. Good to see you still have them.” Bowing low, the commander of Northwatch said, “I swear allegiance to Aren and Lara Kertell. Long may they rule Ithicana.”

Nearly as one, the other commanders rose, swearing allegiance to him and to Lara, until only one remained sitting.

Slowly, his sister rose, hazel eyes unreadable. Aren struggled not to hold his breath, because if Ahnna refused to swear, he wasn’t sure what he’d do.

Ahnna took the decision from him as she said, “Given that I will not be remaining in Ithicana for much longer, I formally resign from the role of Commander of Southwatch island. This matter, and Southwatch’s vote, should be handled by someone who will be here to bear the consequences.”

His stomach hollowed. “You’d rather give up your position than bend the knee to Lara as queen? Are you that fucking unforgiving?”

Lara’s grip tightened on his hand. “That isn’t what she said.”

His sister’s eyes moved to his wife, jaw tight as they stared each other down, then Ahnna said, “I’ve heard Lara’s explanation, as well as yours, Your Grace. I understand that Lara was manipulated and lied to all her life, and that Silas was the villain. I understand that she did not intend for her father’s plans to come to fruition. I saw firsthand what she did to undo the damage her actions caused. But…” Ahnna looked away, shaking her head. “*Knowing* does not change what happened. It does not rebuild homes, or bring back the dead, or make those who were injured whole again. There are many who, in hearing the truth, will forgive her. Yet there are many for whom the truth is not enough to earn their forgiveness, and I am one of them.”

How could it not be enough? Aren opened his mouth to say as much, but in a flurry of motion, Ahnna slammed her palms down

on the table, sending liquid sloshing over the rim of her cup. “You weren’t here, Aren. You don’t know.”

“You act as though I was captured the day of the invasion,” he retorted. “For weeks, I fought day in and day out. Saw men and women I’ve known my whole life fall beneath Maridrinian blades. Lost my whole goddamned household on Midwatch to one fucking woman.”

At the reference to her sister, Lara twitched, her grip tightening on his hand, but she said nothing.

“You saw battles, Aren. Quick deaths. Soldiers’ deaths.” The knuckles on Ahnna’s scarred hands turned white from pressure as she leaned toward him. “The rest of us saw *war*. They hunted our people. Men, women, children, it didn’t matter, and when they caught them, it was no swift death. Since I was sixteen, I’ve fought in vicious, bloody battles, but it all pales in comparison to what I witnessed the Maridrinians do to our people. Every time I close my eyes, I see their faces, which means I cannot forget. And unless I find a way to forget, I will never forgive.” She straightened. “As soon as I am able, I will leave for Harendell to fulfill my commitments. I will do what duties are necessary until you select my replacement in the command of Southwatch, but I will *not* vote. Which means I shall excuse myself for this conversation.”

Not giving him a chance to argue, his twin sister strode from the room, the door shutting heavily behind her.

Silence stretched, and Aren found himself at a loss for words.

Not only was losing his sister’s support a personal blow, with the way some of the commanders were shifting restlessly, it would cost him politically. Mara must have seen the same, for she said, “Ahnna blames herself for much of what has occurred over this past year and subjected herself to the worst of it in a way few other Ithicanians can claim, which has warped her perspective. It is well that she has chosen to remove herself from command in favor of someone with less…personal bias. Especially given that her concerns will soon be for Harendellian matters.”

The unease on the faces of the other commanders eased, several of them nodding in agreement.

"Even without Southwatch's vote, we have a majority," Mara continued. "Which means that the council stands behind both of you as rulers of Ithicana. That said, you may wish to reconsider granting your mercy to the individuals who attempted to take your life, Your Grace. What goodwill you gain from granting the perpetrators mercy will not protect you half as well as fear of the consequences of attempting to harm you, and I think more attempts will occur."

As much as Aren favored mercy, he agreed with Mara. Being faced with Ithicana's worst form of execution would go a long way in dissuading anyone who might dare harm his queen, though to be honest, he'd do worse than any shark if it happened on his watch.

"Those who have lost everything fear nothing," Lara answered. "But if they are to fear anything, let it be my blade. Now that my strength is returning, those who seek my life going forward will find no mercy."

"More Ithicanian blood on your hands is perhaps *not* the best solution," Mara said, and Aren found himself snapping, "Then what is the solution, Commander? Because asking Lara to stand passive while men and women try to cut her throat is only going to mean that their blood is on *my* hands, and I will not kill them slowly."

"An heir."

Aren straightened in surprise, and he heard Lara suck in a breath. "Pardon?"

Settling in her seat and waiting for the other commanders to take theirs, Mara leaned backward. "A solution to the problem would be for the queen to produce an heir. Many who might lift arms against her will stay their hands if she is carrying the future king or queen."

"You want me to use a baby as a shield to protect myself?" Lara's voice was hoarse, and as Aren glanced down at her, it was to

find her whole body rigid.

Mara eyed her, but rather than answering the question, said, “An heir creates a sense of goodwill and stability within any kingdom. It would also demonstrate your commitment to a life in Ithicana.”

A shudder ran through Lara with such violence he thought she might collapse, and Aren shifted to grab her arms only for her to abruptly sit in her chair. “No. No, that is not an option. There will be no baby.”

Aren lowered himself into his own seat, uncertain how he felt about her answer as emotions swirled in his core. That Lara wouldn’t wish to use a child to protect her own life was her nature, and in truth, he felt the same way. Except he found himself wondering if her vehemence was against current circumstances or children in general. He realized that it wasn’t a subject that they’d ever really discussed, and that perhaps he’d made assumptions he should not have.

“You’re the queen, Your Grace,” Mara said. “If you don’t have a child, the Kertell line ends with no certainty of who will hold the crown after your time comes to an end.”

“Why can’t it be as it is in Valcotta?” Lara demanded. “The Empress chose Zarrah over her own son.”

Aren’s stomach twisted, for that felt like an answer to his unasked question. *Don’t leap to conclusions,* he told himself. *Talk to her first.*

“The Empress must choose a blood relation as her successor,” Mara answered, seemingly unmoved, though several of the other commanders were frowning. “Ahnna is to be queen of Harendell, so she cannot be named heir, and His Grace’s only other living relation is Taryn.”

Lara tensed at his cousin’s name, and for that, he couldn’t blame her. Taryn had taken Lara’s culpability in the invasion as a personal betrayal of friendship, her feelings made worse by the fact she’d been held prisoner by the Maridrinians for close to a year. He

had not learned the particulars of how she'd been treated, but he didn't need to know the details to understand it had left a dark mark on his cousin's soul.

Tension within the room was rising, and in truth, he'd had enough. "Your suggestion is heard, Commander," he said. "But as it stands, the queen is still recovering from her injuries and that must be her focus. I will ensure Aster has the resources he requires to protect her at all times, which will keep those ruled by their emotions from taking regrettable actions." He paused, then added, "This meeting is adjourned."

Mara inclined her head, then led the commanders from the room.

Rising to his feet, Aren circled the table to the door, setting the latch into place. "Just in case my grandmother realizes you're up and comes hunting," he said to Lara. "Though I'm not certain even a locked door will keep her out."

Lara gave him a weak smile. "I'm here at her blessing, though I'm sure she'll find another reason to meddle."

If Lara was here with Nana's blessing, it meant his grandmother was confident in his wife's health. "Nana will never change."

Coming back around the table, he took two quick steps then reached down to scoop Lara into his arms.

She gasped out a laugh. "Aren!"

He kissed her throat, inhaling the scent of lilacs, tasting the salt of her skin. Sitting in his chair with her on his lap, he pulled up the skirt of her dress until her injured thigh was revealed, the wound no longer bandaged. "Looks good," he said, trailing a gentle finger over the thick scar. "I should probably have a look at the other, just to be sure."

He caught at the straps of her dress, but she swatted him away. "How can you be thinking about sex after that meeting?"

"Because…" He kissed her, his cock hardening as her lips parted. Her tongue tasted like wine. "I'm finally alone with my beautiful, brilliant, and fierce queen, and that leaves no room for

any other thoughts."

Lara snorted, then caught his hand, which he was using to stroke higher and higher on her thigh. "Would you please redeploy some of the blood in your crotch back to your brain so that we might have an *intelligent* conversation."

A half dozen quips rose to his lips, but there was an edge to his wife's voice that told him she was in no mood for games. So instead he lowered her skirts and met her gaze, waiting to see what she'd say.

"I'm sorry," were her first words, and he opened his own mouth to say that *she* had nothing to apologize for, but Lara pressed a slender index finger to his lips. "I handled every aspect of this meeting poorly. I thought I'd be prepared, but I wasn't."

"Why should you have been? Ahnna should've been civil, but instead she went for blood." Exhaling slowly, he shook his head. "Your presence might have motivated certain conversations to occur sooner than they otherwise would have, but they were inevitable. Ahnna is many things, but impulsive isn't one of them. Her words, her resignation, none of that was something she decided on in the moment."

"I hate that I've come between you two. Hate that the individual who was once your greatest ally is now…" Lara shook her head. "I'm not sure what she is."

Leaving, and soon to be Harendell's problem, was the answer he wanted to give, but Aren bit down on the words. For one, he didn't entirely mean them, and two, as the future queen of Harendell, his sister would continue to have influence in Ithicana. "It's for the best, Lara. She's right that Southwatch's vote should be made by someone who is to remain in Ithicana as an advocate for the island's interests. As to her feelings about you…" He hesitated, then said, "Ahnna knows that it was Silas who invaded Ithicana, that it was his armies who committed atrocities on his orders, but there is little satisfaction to be had in blaming the dead. Likewise with blaming those who are nothing more than names and

sketches on paper. Whereas you are here and an easy target for all the anger and guilt and grief in her heart."

Tears turned Lara's eyes liquid, though she blinked them away. "I *am* to blame. If I'd told you everything, if I'd told you about that *fucking* letter, none of this would have happened."

There'd been a time when he'd thought the same, but now… "Even if you had, do you really think it would have stopped Silas from attacking? The bridge was his obsession, one he sacrificed more than fifteen years of his life to achieving. Do you really think he'd have given up? Or would he just have found another way?"

"I…" A tear trickled down her cheek, but she didn't seem to notice. "He wouldn't have let it go. He'd have died before letting it go." She drew in a sharp breath, as though she weren't getting enough air into her lungs. "He did die rather than let it go."

Died on the end of her blade. God help him, but Aren wished he'd been able to see that moment. Clearing his throat, he said, "I love my sister, but she is intense and proud and unforgiving. Please don't paint all of Ithicana with the brush she has handed you, especially not when all the rest of the commanders swore to you as queen."

"I don't paint them all with the same brush. I know there are people who see things in different ways."

The words came out too quickly, and Aren knew that the concession was an attempt to ease his mind while hers still stewed, convinced she was reviled and hated by all, when that was most definitely not the case. As he watched, her eyes flicked to Keris's portrait where it still sat on the table. "Do *not* blame yourself for what he did."

"I don't." Her face hardened. "I blame *him*."

Reaching over, Aren grasped the paper and crumbled it into a ball, tossing it across the room. "He'll get himself killed with that smartass mouth of his, of that, I have little doubt."

Lara didn't answer, only toyed with the front of his shirt, her eyes distant. Thoughtful and brooding and beautiful, and God help

him, he loved her. Loved every part of her, mind, body, and soul. “Do you want us to stay, Lara? Because I meant what I said to the council: where you go, I go. If you want us to make a life somewhere else, a place where Ithicana is naught but a name on a map, we’ll leave.”

Her eyes shot to his. “No! I don’t want to leave.” She frowned. “Do you want to leave?”

Part of him did. Part of him wanted to take her and walk away from the burden that was rule. Perhaps if he were more of a narcissist, the power that came with the crown would be enough reward to outweigh the toil, but he wasn’t. And these days, it felt like being king was a constant *give give give* with nothing to refill the well. “My life is with you, and if we can’t be happy here together, then I want us to leave.” He hesitated, then asked, “Why do you want to stay?”

She was still, barely seeming to breathe. “I…” She shook her head, a flush rising to her cheeks. “I just do.”

It was no answer but experience had taught him that pushing her in moments like these would only cause her to put up walls. Nor was it the time to press on Mara’s proposition, though that was a conversation that needed to be had. Not because it changed anything but because he’d sworn there’d be no more secrets between them. “I love you, Lara. There is no life for me without you in it.”

In a rapid motion, she moved, twisting in his lap so that her knees were to either side of him.

Her hands slipped around his neck, one tangling in his hair. “You know that I feel the same way, don’t you? How much I love you?”

“I know it.” He pulled her closer, the apex of her thighs pressing against his stomach and her breasts brushing his chest. Capturing her lips with his, he kissed her softly, then with more urgency. Her tongue was in his mouth, her hands in his hair, and he wanted to tear the clothes from her body. Wanted to lay her on

the table and claim her. Make her scream his name, the guards standing outside the doors be damned.

"How much activity are you allowed?" he asked, kissing his way down her throat.

"Why?" Her voice was breathy. "Do you want to go for a walk? Perhaps climb to the summit and admire the view?"

He snorted out a laugh. "It's a view I'm interested in, but not of the ocean."

Catching hold of her hips, he lifted her onto the table and slowly pulled her skirts up her legs.

Lara's eyebrows rose, gaze devilish. "This is hardly appropriate."

He parted her knees, revealing lace undergarments sewn with tiny silver coins around the waist, already wet with her desire. The sight nearly undid him, but he managed to say, "If you didn't want to end up with your dress on the floor, why did you wear these?"

"They're pretty and they match my dress," she purred, gaze darkening. "I wore them because I like them."

"I like them, too," he growled, catching hold of her undergarments and slowly drawing them down her legs. Rubbing a thumb across the damp fabric, he tucked the scrap of lace into his pocket. "I think I'll keep them."

Her cheeks flushed pink, but there was nothing innocent about her as she caught hold of his shirt and jerked. "Kiss me."

Aren obliged, his need barely contained as she bit his bottom lip, her free hand palming his cock through his trousers. God help him, he wanted to fuck her. Wanted to tear off his clothes and thrust into her over and over until they were both spent, but she deserved more than that from him. Deserved to be treated like a queen. "Enough of that," he murmured, catching hold of her hand and drawing it away.

Only for her to twist her wrist, freeing herself and then unbuckling his belt.

"You should know better than to expect obedience," she said,

sliding her hand into his trousers and taking hold of him. He groaned as she stroked his length, his eyes on her parted lips, memories of her mouth around his cock nearly pulling him over the edge.

"There are consequences to disobedience, Your Grace," he growled, his heart thundering as she pumped him hard.

Her eyes were full of challenge as she said, "Are there?"

Ripping his belt loose, he held it up, weapons sliding off the length to clatter to the floor. Catching hold of both her wrists, he bound them together and then pushed her down against the table, hands above her head. Lara let out a gasping moan as he kissed her throat and then her collarbone, her legs wrapping around his waist.

He could feel the heat of her naked sex through the fabric of his trousers and she ground against him, making his cock throb with need. "Behave," he said, pulling down the bodice of her dress to reveal her full breasts, pink nipples hard, "or I'll rip this pretty dress of yours apart and use the pieces to tie you to this table."

"Is that a promise?" Her sandaled heel caught the waist of his trousers, dragging them down, and Aren groaned as the last barrier between them fell away.

She moved her hips, slick sex sliding up and down his length, and he captured one of her nipples in his mouth, drawing it deep. Lara moaned as his teeth scraped across the tip, back arching in a way that caused his tip to enter her. "Yes," she gasped. "Please."

Not yet.

Letting go of her wrists, he took a firm hold of her thighs, pushing them slowly apart. Holding her wide as he dropped to his knees, the scent of her nearly making him come as he drank in the sight of her nakedness. "You're beautiful." He kissed the inside of her thigh, hearing her whimper. "Perfect."

Then he leaned forward and parted her with his tongue. "Mine."

"Yours," she gasped, her back arching as he circled her clit with

his tongue before sliding it inside her. She sobbed his name, her thighs clenching, but he was stronger than her and pressed them wider as he tasted her. Devoured her. Made her his.

His woman.

His wife.

His queen.

"Come for me, Your Grace," he commanded, then captured her clit, sucking it hard. Lara's back arched, her body shuddering as she climaxed, sobbing his name as he stroked her with his tongue.

Aren waited until she went limp, then rose to his feet and lifted her into his arms. He sat on the floor with her in his lap, her head resting against his shoulder. Slowly her breathing steadied, and Lara looked up at him. "Are you going to untie me?"

"Are you going to behave?"

"Never." She smirked, then held up his belt, which she'd managed to free herself from without assistance. "Your turn, Your Majesty."

4

LARA

LARA SLEPT the balance of the day and into the evening, exhausted by unfamiliar exertions, only to wake after the sun had set. Rising from the bed, she bit back a groan, every part of her painfully stiff. She discarded her nightdress on the floor, and knife in one hand, the cane in the other, she made her way across the room and climbed slowly into the bath, the water washing away the stickiness of sweat coating her body.

Aren had wanted to remain with her, but Nana's words still sat heavily in her mind, so she'd told him to go see to matters requiring his attention. He'd protested, but eventually left, patting the pocket holding her undergarments with a smirk as he'd left the room, making her laugh.

She missed laughter between them. The endless jokes and battles of wit they'd engaged in before the invasion, in the months they'd lived and loved in Eranahl with light hearts. They'd never be able to go back to that time, but laughter made her heart swell with hope that they'd find a new version of happiness.

Climbing out of the bath, she toweled herself dry and donned a silk wrap. The storm had ended in the way they always did in Ithicana, raging in one breath and then eerily calm the next, and she opened one set of balcony doors to allow fresh air into the room. The sky was clear, the moon and stars already bright overhead, and Lara pulled a chair between the open doors and settled herself down in it. Every inhale tasted of moisture and smelled of jungle, the *drip drip drip* of water falling from the eaves like music.

Why do you want to stay?

Aren's question circled her thoughts, though she'd yet to come up with an answer. Part of it was that she didn't want to tear Aren from his home, didn't want Ithicana to lose its king and be cast into the uncertainty of a succession war. Another part was that she had a hard time imagining either of them living a simple life as common people, the visions of what it would be like living on a farm or working as a merchant refusing to form in her head. She loved Ithicana, and it felt like home in a way that no other place ever had, yet even that was not the reason that demanded she and Aren remain.

You aren't wanted here.

Lara shivered, remembering all that Ahnna had said. She had no expectations of forgiveness, but…she desperately wanted to prove to the people that she was worthy of living here. Worthy of being their queen, because the life she saw when she closed her eyes was of rebuilding Ithicana, defending it, and making it strong. That was what she wanted, but she didn't think it would be possible unless she proved every single day that she was more than her prior actions.

Acceptance.

The word resonated with truth, and Lara bit at her bottom lip because she had no idea how she might achieve it.

Produce an heir.

She cringed as that conversation replayed in her head, realizing now that Nana hadn't been forestalling intimacy between her and Aren to protect her body, but rather to protect her choice. God… she could only imagine how gutted she'd have felt to have been with child only to discover that everyone thought it self-serving. A way to protect herself, ingratiate herself, to gain the acceptance she craved but not earn it.

Shit.

Lara pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, knowing that her reaction had surprised Aren. Did it change how he felt about

being with her? She…she didn't think so. Certainly his actions when they were alone in the council room suggested otherwise, but doubt and uncertainty refused to silence their whispers into her ears.

Behind her, the door to the room opened.

Lara's grip tightened on her knife, but only Aren appeared. "I brought you something to eat," he said.

"Something that Aster hasn't eaten half of," Jor shouted from beyond. "Clever bastard is just trying to get more than his fair share of rations."

Lara smiled, then grinned broadly as she saw the plate. "Is that…pork?"

"It surely is." He set the plate and a fork on the table next to her. "Turns out a ship with supplies rode out the storm on an island not an hour from here. They had a pig with them, though he met his doom almost upon passing through the gates to the city. Everyone is tired of fish."

"Especially me," she muttered, digging into the meat, which was grilled to perfection. Then a thought occurred to her, and she stilled in her chewing, swallowing hard. "What other supplies did they have?"

"No herbs," he answered. "Nana sent them immediately back to the water with precise instructions, so that should be remedied soon enough."

She sighed, returning to eating though the meat had lost some of its appeal.

Going to the sideboard, Aren poured two drinks and brought them back. Setting them on the table, he dragged another chair next to hers and then flopped down in it, stretching his long legs in front of him. She could feel the tension of the unasked question floating between them, but she was afraid of bringing it up. Afraid that her doubts would be confirmed.

"About Mara's…suggestion." Aren took a long mouthful of his drink, looked at the contents, then drained the glass. "Do you want

children, Lara?"

She swallowed hard, the bite of pork sticking in her throat and forcing her to take a drink herself. *Don't be a coward,* she told herself. *Ask the goddamned question.* "If I don't, does that change things between us?"

"No." He met her gaze. "It does not. The only condition on my desire to be with you for the rest of my life is honesty. So I would like to know your thoughts on this, for I know you have them."

Lara gave a tight nod, setting aside her plate. "Children were not something I was raised to consider. I was sent to Ithicana with a full set of knowledge on how to prevent pregnancy, told that I must avoid it at all cost."

"Because a child would bind you to Ithicana. And to me."

"Yes." She hated talking about this, about what she'd been trained to do, to Ithicana. And to him. But silence had damned her before, and she refused to do the same again. "Though Serin told us it was because our bodies would be weakened by pregnancy and that you'd use a baby to control whichever of us became your bride. He never explained anything in a way that would make it seem that it was him or my father denying or controlling us; everything was always cast at your feet."

Aren exhaled a long breath but said nothing.

Keep going, she told herself. *You can do this. You must do it.* "Though I learned the truth when we went to Vencia and realized that I'd been raised on lies, it pains me to admit that some of those lies refused to relinquish their control. The notion that a child would be used to weaken and control me was one of them. That's why when we were here before the invasion, I kept taking the contraceptive tea."

Aren's jaw was tight, the muscles in his face standing out in the moonlight as he said, "Do you still believe that?"

"No." She gave a sharp shake of her head. "Seeing my sister Sarhina pregnant vanquished that thought from my head. She was as strong as she'd ever been while pregnant, possibly even

stronger. And though she was cautious and careful, being pregnant did not limit her. Nor did her husband Ansel try to use the baby to control her."

Her chin quivered, her eyes burning as tears formed. "I believed at that point that you'd hate me forever and I was haunted by visions of what might have been if I had been entirely honest about the actions I'd taken. Dreams of us together and happy, and after seeing my sister with child, those dreams changed to include that blessing."

Tears were pouring down her cheeks now, entirely beyond her control, because not only was she feeling the grief of *now*, she was feeling the grief of *then*. "I do want us to have a child together, Aren. In my vision of us happy, there is a child, but that vision will never come to be if I use the baby as a tool. To protect myself and win the acceptance of our people by providing them an heir, rather than earning it with actions and deeds."

Aren was quiet for a long moment. "You will never earn the acceptance of all our people, Lara. It's just not possible, and I hate that you would deny yourself what you want because of it."

"I know *all* is impossible." She wiped the tears from her face, sucking in a ragged breath. "You asked me why I wanted to remain in Ithicana, and the reason is that my dream of a happy future is *here*. But I need the chance to earn that future."

"I think you have earned it," he said quietly. "I also understand that it's not about how *I* feel but how *you* feel, and I respect that."

Relief flooded her, but before she could say anything, Aren set a small sea sponge on the table. "When the storm broke, Jor and I went diving with a particular catch in mind. He said you would know what to do with it." Aren hesitated, then added, "Not that you have to, but this gives you the choice."

Lara stared at the sponge, emotion filling her with such intensity that she could scarcely breathe.

"I'll let you finish eating," he said, rising to his feet and taking a few steps away. "I…"

Lara snatched up the sponge and threw herself at him. Aren caught her, but before he could say anything, she kissed him. Hard and fierce enough that their teeth clacked together, her fingers digging into the muscles of his shoulders. “Take me to bed,” she breathed between kisses. “I want you. I need you.”

“Lara, are you—”

“Enough talking.” She bit his bottom lip, relishing his groan, then said, “I’ve had enough goddamned talking.”

For once, he didn’t argue. A few quick steps had them at the bed, and he lowered her down, the sheets cold against her back. He caught hold of the tie on her wrap, slowly unfastening the knot and then drawing the sides of the garment wide before straightening. His eyes roved over her body, and Lara curled her toes, the naked lust in his eyes fueling her own desire.

“You are so beautiful.” His voice was a growl. “The world pales in your presence.”

Giving him a devilish smile, she parted her knees and put the sponge where it needed to be, Mistress Mezat’s training of her and her sisters in the Red Desert once again serving her well. “I said, no more talking.”

He grinned, and it was all teeth. Pulling off his tunic, he unbuckled his belt, weapons falling to the ground with a clank for the second time today. Kicking off his boots, he slowly drew down his trousers, and it was her turn to stare.

Lifting one leg, she pressed her naked foot to his chest, holding him in place as she took her time luxuriating in the perfection of his body. Taller than most men, and broad, every muscle was thick and hard, not a spare ounce of flesh to disguise it. His skin, tanned dark by endless hours in the sun, was marked by as many scars as her own. Badges of honor earned in the defense of his kingdom, and she caught her bottom lip in her teeth, wanting to trail her tongue over each of them.

His dark gaze fixed on her mouth, and he pressed against her foot, fingers curling and uncurling. Nearly at his breaking point.

She fully intended to push him past it.

Running her eyes down his chest and over the sharply defined muscles of his stomach, she let her gaze settle on his cock, as large as the rest of him. Already hard, the tip glistened, and she kept her gaze on it as she trailed a finger down between her breasts, over her navel, and between her legs. Allowing her eyes to drift up to his, she slowly circled her clit with her index finger, a soft moan exiting her lips as she heard his breath turn ragged.

Aren cracked.

Grabbing her ankle, he pulled it out of the way, his hand slipping up her calf as he caught hold of her other leg and pulled her thighs wide. In one thrust, he was inside of her, and Lara sobbed with pleasure as he plunged in and out of her, the headboard slamming against the wall. So many weeks since they'd been together like this, and before that, longer weeks still.

She needed this. Needed him. Needed for them to be together in every way possible, because Aren was hers. Her king, her husband, her life.

Her nails raked down his back and she wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him deeper with each thrust.

"I love you." He kissed her hard, biting at her lip. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too."

Her eyes burned even as her pleasure ratcheted higher, each of his thrusts stroking over her exactly right, because Aren *knew* her. Every inch of her, inside and out.

The climax took her hard and fast, rolling over her in waves and pulling him with her. He shouted her name, burying his face into her neck as he thrust one last time, a flood of heat filling her. His weight came down, his chest against hers, hearts thundering in unison.

Slowly, their breathing steadied, and Aren lifted himself up on one elbow to kiss her. "You all right, love?"

Lara made a soft humming noise, feeling entirely boneless and

incapable of speech.

A soft laugh exited his throat, then Aren kissed her lips, her throat, before meeting her gaze. “Good,” he said. “Because I’m going to have you again.” His eyes were dark, his cock already hardening inside of her. “And again.”

Tilting back her head, Lara smiled.

He was hers. She was his.

Tonight, tomorrow, and for all the tomorrows they ever faced.

5

AREN

"FEELING SATED?" Jor asked as they walked down to the harbor.

Aren snorted and cast a dark look at the older man. "That's none of your fucking business."

"You want to keep your encounters secret, you're going to need to gag that queen of yours," Jor said, kicking at a rock. "Lass has a set of lungs on her, so the whole damn palace was reminded over and over again of your name."

"Kiss my ass," Aren muttered, then added, "Thank you, though."

Jor shrugged. "When you've romanced as many women as I have, you learn a few things. I'm surprised your grandmother didn't mention it. Amelie knows all the tricks."

"Likely because she takes perverse pleasure out of making my life more difficult."

Aren abandoned the conversation as they reached the entrance to the harbor cavern, which was a scene of organized chaos. Fishing boats leaving to haul in more catch. Larger vessels loading families and their belongings, ready to abandon the city that had been the prison to return to their homes on other islands, which would do much to ease the burden of supplying Eranahl.

But he and Jor were here to deal with another matter, one that couldn't be put off.

Climbing into a small canoe, they paddled down the tunnel, following the grating echo of metal saws. Aren's eyes went to the roof of the tunnel, following the deep scrapes in the rock that the portcullis had made as Silas's ship dragged it out. During a break

in a storm, they'd been able to move the massive steel structure to one side of the tunnel to allow boats to pass, but the larger task of removing it and replacing it remained.

He blinked, and a vision of Lara on the far side of it filled his mind's eye. Bleeding and half-drowned. Dying before his eyes and him unable to reach her.

"Morning, Your Grace," one of the smiths said. "Once we've broken it down into pieces, we'll bring them back into the city and reforge the portcullis, though we might need to source more steel from Harendell as we lost the chains."

"No," Aren answered, staring at the twisted metal but seeing Lara caught beneath it. The bubbles rising from her lips and the light going out of her eyes. "Drop it in the sea. I'll make arrangements to purchase steel from the Harendellians."

The man made a face. "The cost—"

Jor whistled sharply. "He said drop it in the sea, so that's what we'll do. Get to sawing, you lazy arse."

The men grumbled but complied. Having no desire to sit idle and watch, Aren took up one of the saws and set to cutting bars himself. Section by section, they cut down the twisted metal, dragging pieces out to deep water and allowing them to sink. There was some catharsis to the work, ridding the island and himself of something that held so many awful memories, though the work was exhausting.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he stared out over the sea, catching sight of an approaching vessel. A small outrigger with only three men aboard, both of whom he knew. All lifted hands in greeting as he was recognized, one shouting, "News from the mainland, Your Grace." As they drew closer, he added, "Not fresh, I'm afraid, but the storm kept me cooling my heels in the bridge. But fresh or not, you'll want to be reading the report straight away."

Aren's stomach tightened. Nothing he needed to read right away would be good. "Hand it over then." The boats bumped

together, the man jumping into Aren's canoe and handing him a wax-wrapped packet. Aren remained standing, balancing instinctively on the rocking swells as he unwrapped the package, scanning a report compiled at Southwatch of news from the continent. "That bitch," he hissed as he reached the last item, handing the page to Jor. But before the other man could begin to start reading, screams echoed out of the tunnel.

Cries for help.

6

LARA

"YOU SEEM REFRESHED, YOUR GRACE," Lia said. "Stronger already."

Lara wasn't sure about that, but she *did* feel happier despite having not gotten a tremendous amount of sleep. Not because of the sex, though that had been…*intense* in a way that still gave her shivers, but because telling Aren her thoughts and fears had lifted a weight from her shoulders. There was a comfort that came from him standing at her side despite knowing the worst, a security that made her feel strong though her body was not. "I want to walk to the harbor."

Lia exhaled, her displeasure over the request apparent. "I'd advise against it. All it takes is one well-placed arrow and—"

"I'm not hiding in the palace forever," Lara interrupted. "There is a difference between caution and paranoia. I'm not allowing my life to be ruled by fear."

"As you wish." Lia inclined her head, then went to the door and informed Aster and the others of her plans.

Lara retrieved her knives and the cane, which had proven to be of great assistance. The silk skirts of her dress swished around her legs as she limped after Lia, finding Aster and the rest of her bodyguard waiting in the hall. "They're removing the ruined gate today and I wish to see how the work progresses."

He didn't argue, only offered his arm. Today, Lara decided to take it, because the challenge she wished to face was not the stiffness in her leg but stepping out of the safety of the palace and into the city. To surround herself with the people whose

acceptance she wished to earn, though she didn't yet know how she'd do it.

With the aid of Aster and the cane, her progress was much swifter today, and Lara soon found herself standing before the doors to the palace, which were open and flanked by a pair of heavily armed women. Taking a deep breath, Lara stepped out into the sunshine.

"Many left this morning to return to their homes on other islands," Aster said. "Though there is some uncertainty of what they'll find, so some will return."

Those whose homes had been burned or destroyed by her father's soldiers. Those who had nothing to come back to.

What could she possibly offer them? Gold from Ithicana's coffers to rebuild was hardly the answer. Nor was building with her own two hands, though she was happy to do so.

Walk, she ordered herself. *At the very least, show them that you are not afraid.*

Step click.

Step click.

Step click.

The hot tropical sun seared down overhead, the air nearly unbreathable with the thick humidity, but she slowly made her way around the lake at the base of the volcano's crater. Those doing laundry at the water's edge stopped their work to watch her, as did those whose shops lined the pathway. Some expressions bore curiosity. Others animosity. But what Lara sensed the most was that she was being judged.

"Be on your guard," Aster said under his breath, his free hand resting on the hilt of the long machete he favored. "Show no mercy."

I need to do something. Something worthy of a queen.

But Lara didn't know what, and the absence of any form of solution drew more sweat to her skin than the sun burning overhead.

Laughter greeted her as they reached the entrance to the harbor cavern, children playing in the waters. Lara paused on the base of the stairs to watch them, at least two dozen splashing in the calm waters, which were empty of vessels, everyone hard at work. Once upon a time, this was where she'd learned to swim under the cajoling of many of these children, and her eyes stung at the memory. She'd been so happy, then. They'd all been so happy.

A shadow passed beneath the children.

"Aster," she gasped, but he was already shouting, "Shark! Get out of the water!"

The children reacted instantaneously, swimming to the edge and clambering out. The enormous shark rose to the surface and was swimming in circles around a young girl. She screamed, shrill and panicked, and without thought, Lara reacted.

Wrenching out of Aster's grip, she took two quick steps and jumped.

Water closed over Lara's head, bubbles obscuring her vision as she kicked to the surface. Screams of panic filled her ears, terrified children as well as Aster shouting, "Calm yourselves! It won't hurt her!"

If only that were true.

Startled by the splash, the shark broke away from circling the girl, and Lara swam her direction. Ever and always, she had been awkward in the water, and that had not changed. But even with her skirts tangling in her legs, she made it to the child before the shark resumed its circling.

Pulling the crying girl close to her, she gasped out, "Stay calm. Don't thrash about."

As the girl calmed, Lara pulled her knife.

It was madness to believe it would do much against such an enormous creature, but if she could stab it when it attacked, it was possible that the girl would get out unscathed. The shark circled, dark dorsal fin cutting the water, and Lara tracked its path, keeping herself between it and the girl.

“Call for a boat! Call for a boat!” people shouted, but above them Aster screamed, “Do not intervene! She is the true queen of Ithicana and it will not harm her!”

Yet above it all, she heard the echo of Nana’s voice. *The creatures steered clear of you because your blood was fouled with stimulants.*

The shark closed in, head rising slightly out of the water to reveal one of its black eyes. Cold and thoughtless, driven by instinct and need, and entirely incapable of the things Aster and those like him believed. It cared not for what was in her heart, only for filling its belly.

She’d fight it to the end.

“Stay behind me,” she said to the girl, the child’s legs bumping hers as she pressed tight to Lara’s back, both of them treading water.

Closer.

Closer.

“A boat is coming,” someone shouted, then Aren’s voice: “Lara!”

The shark thrashed its tail, agitated, and Lara tensed, gripping her knife tight. The boat wouldn’t make it in time, and she’d only have one chance.

The dark shadow darted in, then veered, the tip of its tail striking her arm. Her knife spun out of her grip. She reached, trying to catch the sinking weapon, but her fingers only brushed the hilt as it dropped out of reach.

The girl was screaming and crying, the boat knifing closer, but the shark was coming in again. It would kill them both before Aren made it.

Unless she did something.

Lifting her arm, Lara bit down until she tasted blood. Then she swam. *Come and get me,* she willed the shark. *There’s nothing in my blood this time.*

She felt it coming. Felt it chasing. Knew that it would be

heartbeats until jaws closed on her legs.

"They've got the girl!"

There was no chance for relief as the shark swam past her, its skin rough against hers, and the world seemed to stand still. A beam of sunlight from the cavern opening illuminated the water around her, and Lara stopped swimming, sinking beneath the surface.

The shark was larger than she'd realized but her fear filtered away as it slowly swam past her. Watching her. Seeing her.

I see you, too, she silently said to it, reaching out a hand to touch it.

Only for bubbles to explode from above, hands latching onto her shoulders and hauling her to the surface. She landed with a thump and a gasp on the floor of the boat, Aren's face appearing above her. "Are you hurt?"

"No." She sat up, leaning over the edge of the boat to watch the shark swim back out of the tunnel. "It didn't hurt me."

Small hands caught at her arm, and Lara turned to find the girl next to her.

"It's all right." She pulled the child against her, both their hearts hammering. "It will be all right."

The boat banged against the stone dock, and all was a flurry of motion. Emma reached for her, sobbing *thank you* over and over, while Aster shouted above everyone, "All hail the true Queen of Ithicana! Chosen of the guardians! Long may she reign!"

Lara hardly heard him, her eyes on the people around her. There was no way to know why the shark hadn't attacked, whether it was some sort of mystical approval or if the creature simply hadn't been hungry. It didn't matter. What mattered was that *this* was how she'd earn her place. By defending her people. By taking the risks no one else would.

Aren lifted her into his arms, carrying her up the steps into the sunshine. Dropping to his knees, he held her tight against his chest. "God help me, Lara, you can't keep doing that. You can't keep

scaring me by risking yourself."

"It's who I am, so you'll have to learn to live with it," she said softly, then extracted herself from his grip and climbed to her feet. Aster appeared, holding out her cane, which she took.

Leaning her weight on it, Lara watched as the crowd dispersed, children smiling at her and a few of the men and women inclining their heads as they passed. One of the men who'd been in the boat with Aren and Jor, a man she didn't recognize, approached and bowed to her. "Your Grace."

Then he handed an open, waxed packet of paper to Aren. "When you've decided how to proceed, I'll bring the message back to Southwatch."

Something about his tone sent a prickle of unease down her spine, and she asked, "Is there news? What has happened?"

Aren's face was grim as he extracted the pages from the packet, handing them to her. Ink bled from the dampness of her hands as she skimmed the report from the continent, her eyes snagging on Keris's name. On Zarrah's. "Oh no." She met Aren's gaze. "What does this mean?"

He exhaled, squaring his shoulders. "It means war."

Lara and Aren have retired from main character status, but they still have a role to play in future Bridge Kingdom novels! They make cameo appearances in The Inadequate Heir, but be prepared to see a lot more of them in the fourth novel, coming in 2023!